

FEATURE

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STANDING BY THEIR PRINCIPLES

Two Librarians
Who Faced
Challenges



Introduction by Helen Adams

NOT IN OUR HOUSE



What do school librarians fear most? Hands down, their biggest fear is a formal challenge to a resource in the school library. There are no accurate statistics about the number of challenges to school library resources. The staff of ALA's Office for Intellectual Freedom estimates that only about 20 percent are reported to ALA annually. For the year 2014 the number of challenges reported was 311 (ALA 2015).

In the article that follows, two courageous school librarians tell the stories of their challenges and what they learned. Both were recognized with national awards for their stands against censorship. Dee Ann Venuto received the American Association of School Librarians Intellectual Freedom Award in 2011, and in 2013 DaNae Leu was awarded the Robert B. Downs Intellectual Freedom Award from the faculty of the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Work Cited:

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When parents and school librarians draw battle lines over censorship, both sides see themselves as defending young minds. Typically, parents have discovered a book in the school library collection that they find unacceptable for their own child based on values they hold dear, and say "This does not belong in our house." On the other hand, the First Amendment and the Library Bill of Rights ethically bind the librarian to provide access to an expanse of information beyond what is right for a limited segment of the student body. Everyone involved is striving to uphold honorable principles.

In 2012 a kindergartener in Davis School District brought home a library book that disturbed her mother. The picture book *In Our Mothers' House* by Patricia Polacco portrays a family with same-gender parents. The student's mother contacted the school librarian and asked for the book's removal. The librarian explained that there was a process by which books could be reconsidered. The mother filled out the form, and the librarian assembled the committee. The committee determined that the

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picture book would stay on the shelves but be relocated from the picture book section to the shelves for longer fiction.

The parent then gathered the signatures of twenty-five parents within the school boundaries and petitioned the district to remove the book entirely from the school. At this point, the district had the choice of standing by the school-based committee's decision or going forward with a district-level reconsideration. It chose to appease the parents and convened a committee that included the district's legal representative. From the transcripts of the meeting, it appears that the legal representative's voice held a lot of sway. She interpreted a Utah state law that prohibited school curricula from advocating homosexuality as pertaining to school library books. The committee of seven voted six to one to remove the book from the shelves and place it behind the counter, where it could be checked

out with a permission slip from a parent. The lone librarian on the committee dissented.

At this point it became personal. My school, while not the school where the challenge originated, was one of four elementary schools (out of a total of sixty in the district) that owned the book. All copies of the title district-wide were included in the verdict. Not a little distressed by the mandate to place the book in "protective custody," I succumbed to a fit of defiance. My school's copy of *In Our Mothers' House* ended up displayed prominently on the shelves behind my desk, literally behind the counter.

Within a week after being told to remove *In Our Mothers' House* from my shelves, I attended a district training meeting for elementary school librarians. At the end of the meeting, behind closed doors, our director explained the decision to remove the book and place it behind the counter. She then

instructed us, in order to prevent further challenges of this nature, to proactively remove books with homosexual characters and place them behind our counters, as well.

Stunned at being asked to take unethical actions, I asked facetiously, "Why don't we segregate books with characters of color as well?" To be fair, the administrator who orchestrated this plan, whom I truly respect, wanted to protect other books from challenges should a witch hunt ensue.

The following day, still indignant, I received a call from a reporter from the *Salt Lake Tribune*, following up on her initial story about the decision. I expressed frustration and disappointment over both the original decision and the mandate to remove other books (Rogers 2012). Some local readers of the *Tribune* considered my conversation with the reporter to be inappropriate airing of dirty

laundry; others called it a heroic stance for intellectual freedom.

Once the article broke, groups from all over the country also began turning their attention toward our situation. The Intellectual Freedom Committee of the Utah Library Association offered assistance, as did the National Coalition Against Censorship. The Utah chapter of the ACLU let its concerns be known, along with many LGBT groups across the state.

The district continued to stand by the decision to remove *In Our Mothers' House* from the shelves but quickly extinguished the plan to remove any other books. In the fall of 2012 the ACLU brought a lawsuit on behalf of a parent, charging that her children's First Amendment rights had been violated by limiting access to the book. Before the suit could go to court, Davis School District conceded that library books were not curricular resources, eliminating the rationale for removing the book from open circulation (ACLU 2013). The books were immediately returned to the shelves. As a result of this ordeal, our district took a hard look at policies and created strong guidelines to assist librarians when faced with future challenges.

I feel strongly that all children deserve to see their lives, their experiences, and their families reflected back in the books they read. They should also be lucky enough to see other lives, other experiences, and other families. That is the promise of the First Amendment, and I am proud to uphold it.



DaNae Leu is the school librarian at Snow Horse Elementary School in the Davis School District in Kaysville, Utah. She is a member of AASL. She is a board member of the Utah Educational Library Media Association and is School Library Section Chair for the Utah Library Association. She was awarded the Robert B. Downs Intellectual Freedom Award and Jeanne Layton Intellectual Freedom Award.

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PROFESSIONAL AND PERSONAL GROWTH

The Realities of Challenges to Intellectual Freedom

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The challenge at my school, Rancocas Valley Regional High, began when almost twenty community members attended a board meeting, accompanied by a county newspaper editorialist, asking for the removal of three library books. The group provided information about what they claimed to be President Obama's "homosexual agenda," which included appointing Kevin Jennings, former president of the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN), to the U.S. Department of Education as assistant deputy secretary in the Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools. Members of

the group had searched our high school library's online catalog for book titles recommended by GLSEN and requested their removal. The books in question all deal with the topic of sexuality and individuals who identify as LGBT: *Revolutionary Voices*, *The Full Spectrum*, and *Love and Sex*.

Who Were the Challengers?

Based on previous complaints, our superintendent believed the group at the board meeting was affiliated with Glenn Beck's 9/12 Project. Searching the Internet, we discovered this to be true. Surprisingly, their online communications were not private, and hundreds of posts regarding plans and ideology were revealed. These made it clear that

9/12-ers did not value the tolerance education taught in public schools and were planning a "blitz of local school boards" to inform them of the "homosexual liberal takeover... and request removal of materials" (Blitz 2010). Their decision to go public and bring in the press made it easier for us to be transparent and public in our response.

Our Response

With the aid of the superintendent, national organizations, and members of the review committee, a host of information resources, including policies, articles, and letters, were assembled regarding the challenge. The committee members read these sources and the books in question, voting to keep two titles on the shelves and remove *Revolutionary Voices*.



POST CHALLENGE I BECAME A
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Meanwhile, 9/12 members enacted their plans, presenting information to area high schools where formal complaints were never submitted. The American Library Association, American Civil Liberties Union, National Coalition Against Censorship, and state organizations issued statements of support, and a group of local actors took readings from *Revolutionary Voices* on the road as a peaceful protest. Later we learned through Open Public Records Act requests that the local public library had removed all copies of *Revolutionary Voices* from its branches without due process.

The Personal Side of a Challenge

As a librarian, the concept of defending intellectual freedom seems logical in theory. However, in practice, the process can become difficult, making professionalism paramount. While following policy and procedure to review the books, I became a target as well, referred to as sexualizing and indoctrinating children. One cannot deny the emotional toll a challenge can take. Never did I expect to be portrayed as someone who did not protect and care for young adults. Conversely, never did I expect the level of support I received from the dedicated individuals in ALA's Office for Intellectual Freedom and the National Coalition Against Censorship. Fortunately, because I quickly saw the political, social, and possibly national connections of this organized challenge, I reached out to these professionals who provided me with emotional support, talking points, and options. In some ways they were therapy for the stress. I would not have handled interactions with stakeholders or the media as well without these great people.

Results of the Challenge

This challenge allowed me the opportunity to write, lecture, and collaborate with other librarians on the front lines of advocating for the principles libraries uphold. Post challenge I became a better teacher, more adept at communicating the purpose of libraries in a democratic society. Through our curriculum, students receive bibliographic/research instruction each year of high school. They are made aware of the librarians' Code of Ethics and are educated about the process of removal and selection of materials in collections. We speak of privacy, labeling, voluntary censorship, data mining, filters, civic participation, and access rights. Our students are better educated on the purpose of libraries and the services they provide. Students are empowered to choose the best resources for themselves.

As a result of the challenge, I've increased justifications for acquisitions, particularly in urban literature, music, and graphic novels. These justifications include purchasing books from suggested bibliographies and, as support, relying on documents such as ALA's Library Bill of Rights, *Intellectual Freedom Manual*, and the Freedom to Read statement. In regard to providing access to information, I am compelled to serve students' needs, advocate for their First Amendment rights, and meet their requests. For certain, decisions about providing materials, particularly materials rated "R" or CDs with sexually explicit language, pose difficult questions for librarians. However, I am proud to say that

among our 500 plus seniors, 75 percent report the library "most definitely" impacted the value of their education, and 63 percent will use libraries in the future. Important tenets of librarianship are closely linked to the Constitution and the Bill of Rights; it is our duty to uphold these and educate our students about them.



Dee Ann Venuto is the school librarian for Rancocas Valley Regional High School in Mt. Holly, New Jersey. She is a member of AASL and chair of the New Jersey Association of School Librarians Intellectual Freedom Committee. She received the AASL Intellectual Freedom Award in 2011 and the New Jersey Library Association Intellectual Freedom Award in 2011, and in 2010 she was honored by the National Coalition Against Censorship as a defender of free speech. She wrote the article "Managing Challenges to Library Resources," which was published in the December 2014/January 2015 issue of School Library Monthly.

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